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A MAN OF MYSTERY

BY SELDEN PEABODY DELANY

THE youth of America has for many decades been nurtured under the spell of certain widely acknowledged ideals. At least that has been true of those of our young people who are indigenous to the soil and proceed from American stock. They have been taught to regard with the utmost esteem those heroic individuals who in the early part of the seventeenth century fled from the tyrannical authorities of Europe to found communities of free men in the American wilderness. Especially have they been encouraged to venerate the founders of the New England colonies, who planted in this new world the Puritan traditions of self-government, strictness of life, and the right to practice their religion in their own way, untrammelled by the pronouncements of an Established Church. To them we largely owe our prevalent ideals: self-reliance, democracy, religious freedom, popular education, simplicity of life, utilitarian morality, and so forth.

Whose heart does not expand as he recalls the conspicuous leaders of revolutionary days, men like Putnam, John Adams, Patrick Henry, Hamilton and Washington? We fondly imagine that they were compacted of different clay from the rest of the human race. As we pick our way along the narrow, tortuous streets of old Boston, do we not feel that our feet are treading on holy ground; or, as we visit Faneuil Hall or the Old South Church for the first time, that we have penetrated to the innermost sanctuaries of American liberties? The old families of Boston embody for us the most enviable social standards, as representing the supreme type of American culture. To be born with such a name, we would suppose, is to be presented with a key which will unlock every door worth entering. If on such an inheritance be superimposed the refinement and breadth and detachment that are alleged to be acquired through a Harvard education, there is little left to be desired in this world, unless it

be a Unitarian religious consciousness with its restrained enthusiasms and liberal attitude toward modern thought.

Perhaps no one man has summed up in himself the dominant ideals of this generation of Americans more completely than Henry Adams. He was in the direct line of succession of one of the most able and distinguished families of American history. Samuel Adams, John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Charles Francis Adams—what better ancestral stuff could any American boy desire? He was educated at the Boston Latin School and Harvard. He was on terms of intimate acquaintance or kinship with most of the social, political and intellectual leaders of New England, as he later became through his residence in Washington with the political leaders of the nation. During the troublous years of the Civil War he served as private secretary to his father, Charles Francis Adams, when that statesman was our Minister to England. In this way he had the enviable opportunity of knowing intimately many of the most influential figures in contemporary European history. Thus Henry Adams became not only the most favored and finished product of the American tradition; he was also one of the most characteristic representatives of our modern English-speaking civilization. In his personality, and in the successive episodes of his varied career, he exhibited to a superlative degree its distinctive brand of social cultivation, its inherited tastes and prejudices, its intellectual sympathies, its political tendencies, and its philosophical and religious attitude.

Do we wish to ascertain whether this civilization of which we are a living part is tending upward or downward; whether the attainment of the ends for which most of our fellow men are striving will satisfy the human spirit; whether we should accept the popular dictum that the present century is the apex of human progress; whether there is adequate reason for believing in the idea of human progress at all; whether the Protestant revolt in the sixteenth century against the authority of the Catholic Church has yielded beneficial results for humanity; whether our moral standards, educational methods, and artistic achievements have surpassed those of the Middle Ages; or whether democratic government has on the whole led to an increase in

human happiness and effectiveness? The best way to answer such questions as these is to ask Henry Adams. He knows, for he sounded to its depths our modern British-American culture. He enjoyed an intimate acquaintance with the best that we have been able to produce in art, literature, politics and social life. Moreover, by virtue of his wide and leisurely reading and his unusual opportunities of travel, he was thoroughly qualified to compare our attainments with those of earlier centuries. What, then, was his mature judgment upon the ideals and traditions which he inherited? What was the ultimate result of his "education", as he was wont to describe his life?

It can hardly be said that he has proclaimed his conclusions in no uncertain terms. However exhaustive may be our study of the writings of Henry Adams, there remains about him a considerable element of mystery. Perhaps much of our uncertainty as to his teaching arises from the fact that he arrived at his final synthesis very late in life. Long as was his allotted span of life,—he had just passed his eightieth birthday when he vanished from the earthly scene,—he nevertheless did not live long enough to state his inductions in a coherent and final system of thought. It is not difficult, however, for the most cursory reader of his writings to ascertain the direction in which his thought was inevitably leading him. In spite of the long years of mysterious silence from what he called his "failure" in 1871, when his education was ended, until 1891 when his life was complete; in spite of many perplexing passages; in spite of frequent lapses from the "height of knowledge" to the "abyss of ignorance"—it does not require unusual discernment to perceive the goal toward which he was straining in his declining years.

For these purposes we need not concern ourselves with his earlier essays and articles on economic and scientific subjects, nor with his editorship of *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW*, nor even with his voluminous *History of the United States*, which deals exhaustively with the period from 1801 to 1817. We need not linger over his too brief career as Professor of History at Harvard in the early 'seventies. His mature judgment was that he had not accomplished conspicuous results in any of these positions. He tells us characteristically in his *Education*: "Thus it turned

out that of all his many educations, Adams thought that of school-teacher the thinnest. Yet he was forced to admit that the education of an editor, in some ways, was thinner still."

The writings which will throw most light on the ultimate trend of Henry Adams's thinking were the fruitage of his later years: *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres*, privately printed in 1904; and *The Education of Henry Adams*, privately printed in 1906. He brought these out privately with a view to revising them thoroughly after they had been evaluated and criticized by his more discriminating friends. Henry Adams was nothing if not humble-minded. Unfortunately, however, his literary labors came to an end before these revisions could be completed. To a lesser extent we should consult *A Letter to American Teachers* (1910), which was recently published along with several other papers by his brother, Brooks Adams, in a volume entitled *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*. We shall also find interesting and valuable information in *Letters to a Niece*, published with a memoir by Mabel La Farge in 1920. This volume also contains those striking and significant verses entitled *The Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres*, which were discovered after his death in a little wallet of private papers.

Although *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres* was published before *The Education of Henry Adams*, it is desirable to read the *Education* first, as it gives us a more complete portrait of Henry Adams as a man and enables us the better to appraise his attitude towards contemporary civilization. The *Education* gives one at first a distinctly chaotic impression, as of a man who has labored in vain at variegated tasks, and through some perverse wrong-headedness has found it impossible to adapt himself to his environment. Here was a man with an enviable inheritance and unequalled opportunities, a man in whose mind and character were interwoven many of the finest American strains; yet he turned away from it all with a decisive gesture of rejection, and preferred to sojourn in France, pottering about among the artistic and literary remains of the thirteenth century. It is not surprising that *The Education of Henry Adams* has puzzled even its most discriminating readers. The book has enjoyed an unusually large sale for a serious literary effort, and for two years

after its publication it was the most widely read among non-fiction works in every section of the United States. The drawing-room criticism of the book has been that Adams was a crabbed, eccentric old man, who grew more crotchety and queer and sardonic with the passing years, although it is universally admitted that he expressed his revolutionary opinions in a forceful and gripping literary style. He could not, it was commonly assumed, be taken seriously, because he displayed a heartless contempt for many of our most cherished American institutions and ideals. That in itself to most Americans would argue a regrettable perversity if not a positively psychopathic state of mind.

Henry Adams has told us that he mentally called this work a *Study of Twentieth Century Multiplicity*. It was apparently intended to be chaotic, like our twentieth century civilization. It sets forth the amazing and intricate by-paths through which modern man must tread his way in his search for the truth. There is no unity in his own mind nor in the universe. He has lost the way home as well as the key to his front door. Henry Adams, as a representative twentieth century man, tried to fit in to this complicated and incoherent environment, but could not. The *Education* tells the story of his frustrated efforts to adapt himself to the social and intellectual *milieu* of his time. He might have been more successful had he been willing to compromise his principles, become satisfied with mediocrity, exchange his soul for money, sheepishly follow the crowd, call evil good and good evil, or abandon the search for truth as a hopeless enigma. He steadfastly refused to take any of these short-cuts to success, and it is consistent loyalty to principle which makes the story of his life one of the most encouraging and inspiring books ever written by an American.

In his *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres*, which he called a *Study of Thirteenth Century Unity*, Henry Adams has left us perhaps the most sympathetic and convincing interpretation of the Middle Ages that has ever been written in English. He writes enthusiastically of the literature, theology, mysticism, saints, stained glass, sculpture, and architecture of an epoch in the history of Europe when well-nigh everyone believed in God, when civilization was definitely Christian, and when Christendom

was one. It was predominantly the age of faith, and every human interest—whether art, learning, sex, beauty, war or sin—was viewed primarily as related to God. Every phenomenon in the field of consciousness was apprehended under the aspect of eternity. The most superficial reader of this book cannot escape the atmosphere of light, the glow of other-worldiness, the spirit of order and harmony and beauty, the triumphant note of spiritual joy, which pervade its pages and sharply differentiate it from the *Education*.

Henry Adams has expressed the purpose of this contrast in his *Education* (p. 434). His purpose was to compare the two periods of civilization, to determine whether the world has progressed or retrograded in the last seven hundred years. This is his statement of his method:

Any schoolboy could see that man as a force must be measured by motion, from a fixed point. Psychology helped here by suggesting a unit—the point of history when man held the highest idea of himself as a unit in a unified universe. Eight or ten years of study had led Adams to think he might use the century 1150–1250, expressed in Amiens Cathedral and the Works of Thomas Aquinas, as the unit from which he might measure down to his own time, without assuming anything as true or untrue, except relation. The movement might be studied at once in philosophy and mechanics. Setting himself to the task, he began a volume which he mentally knew as *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres: a Study of Thirteenth-Century Unity*. From that point he proposed to fix a position for himself, which he could label: *The Education of Henry Adams: a Study of Twentieth-Century Multiplicity*. With the help of these two points of relation, he hoped to project his lines forward and backward indefinitely, subject to correction from anyone who should know better.

His reverent admiration for the Virgin of Chartres, and his keen appreciation of the striking phenomena in art and in morals which have resulted from the Catholic devotion to Mary, would be inexplicable in a man of his traditions and antecedents had he not advanced to an unusual discernment and comprehension of the intrinsic excellence of Catholic truth and life. Nowhere can one read so glowing a tribute to the influence of the Virgin on the thought and morals of Christendom as in Chapter XIII of *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres*. He tells us how in the Middle Ages there arose throughout Catholic Europe a fervent popular

devotion to the Blessed Virgin, because of the universal sense of the Divine holiness and justice, along with an intense conviction of the sinfulness of humanity. All people knew that they were sinners, and they dreaded falling into the hands of God. They came to look upon Mary as the friend of sinners, almost as their advocate and intercessor as against the Church and the Holy Trinity. She was human, and because she was also a woman, she could sympathize with their weaknesses and extricate them from their difficulties. Particularly was she regarded as the helper of the poor and friendless. The lowest of the low took refuge under her protection. The Protestants, and especially those inclined toward Puritan strictness and severity, were horrified at her toleration of such wretched sinners. Consequently they despised all the popular devotion to Mary, and expunged her name from their hymns and liturgies. Nevertheless it was this widespread popular devotion to the Mother of God that compelled the building of churches and cathedrals in her honor, such as the world has never been able to equal. It was the common people—the whole population—who built Chartres, Amiens, Rheims, the architectural wonders of Christendom.

Though Henry Adams remained to the end outside of the visible Church, he certainly belonged to the invisible soul of the Church. It is a significant picture of his closing years in Paris that Miss La Farge draws for us in her *Memoirs* (p. 24):

Songs of the Crusades, love-songs or spinning songs composed their evening concerts for an audience of one, but every evening before saying good-night, the Uncle would ask for a song to the Virgin. With eyes half-closed, and head thrown back, he would listen intently, as if joining in the song or *prayer* himself.

The *Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres* is too long to be quoted here in full. It sums up in poetic form Henry Adams's ultimate explanation of the sorrows and catastrophes of the modern materialistic world. He speaks as though he were the cosmic representative of his race, who seven hundred years ago came to the Virgin of Chartres and prayed for grace. In the course of the years he strayed away from her and lost his childlike faith. He wandered everywhere, seeking the lost clue to the mind of God. He did not find his Father and he lost his Mother. Thereupon he crossed the sea and sought to set up the Father's Kingdom in

the Promised Land. Ultimately he and his fellows dethroned the Father and fell to worshipping themselves. That sort of worship, however, could not satisfy them. Finally they set up a new God, the Dynamo. He recites for the amusement of his Lady of Chartres the strange *Prayer to the Dynamo*, which is the fantastic expression of the only worship in which he and his race can now believe. Then he turns to his Lady with this final pathetic confession of deep spiritual need:

A curious prayer, dear lady! is it not?
Strangely unlike the prayers I prayed to you!
Stranger because you find me at this spot,
Here, at your feet, asking your help anew.

Strangest of all, that I have ceased to strive,
Ceased even care what new coin fate shall strike.
In truth it does not matter. Fate will give
Some answer; and all answers are alike.

So, while we slowly rack and torture death
And wait for what the final void will show,
Waiting I feel the energy of faith
Not in the future science, but in you!

The man who solves the Infinite, and needs
The force of solar systems for his play,
Will not need me, nor greatly care what deeds
Made me illustrious in the dawn of day.

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But when, like me, he too has trod the track
Which leads him up to power above control,
He too will have no choice but wander back
And sink in helpless hopelessness of soul,

Before your majesty of grace and love,
The purity, the beauty and the faith;
The depth of tenderness beneath; above,
The glory of the life and of the death.

When your Byzantine portal still was young,
I came here with my master Abelard;
When *Ave Maris Stella* was first sung,
I joined to sing it here with St. Bernard.

When Blanche set up your glorious Rose of France,
In scholar's robes I waited on the Queen;
When good Saint Louis did his penitence,
My prayer was deep like his; my faith as keen.

Help me to see! not with my mimic sight—
With yours! which carried radiance, like the sun,
Giving the rays you saw with—light in light—
Tying all suns and stars and worlds in one.

Help me to know! not with my mocking art—
With you, who knew yourself unbound by laws;
Gave God your strength, your life, your sight, your heart,
And took from Him the Thought that Is—the Cause.

Help me to feel! not with my insect sense,—
With yours that felt all life alive in you;
Infinite heart beating at your expense;
Infinite passion breathing the breath you drew!

Help me to bear! not my own baby load,
But yours; who bore the failure of the light,
The strength, the knowledge and the thought of God,—
The futile folly of the Infinite!

Can we doubt that the gracious Lady to whom he turned in his final hour of desperate need heard his prayer and interceded with her Son to receive his departing soul and lead him finally into the regions of the blessed? Miss La Farge at the close of her *Memoir* (p. 27) makes this significant comment upon the *Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres*:

In this *Prayer* Henry Adams makes an act of faith in the Son's divinity. He ends by saying in his own words what Saint John said twenty centuries before: "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not." Henry Adams felt the failure of the world to receive the light, but he leaves no shadow of a doubt that he himself perceived "That was the true light".

It is a cheap and easy criticism to say that Henry Adams's life was a failure. It is true that he did not achieve success in a worldly sense: he never held public office; his writings were not widely read during his lifetime; he could scarcely have supported himself had he not been a man of independent means; he was

known only to a select circle of acquaintances and friends; he was never acclaimed as one whom the American public delighted to honor (as he never wished to be). But what, after all, is the purpose of a man's life? Is it to amass millions, or gain newspaper notoriety, or bask in sybaritic ease? Or is it rather to discover the truth that is unchanging and eternal, to guide and enlighten and inspire his fellow men, and enable them the better to attain to their true destiny? If it is a praiseworthy ideal to serve our fellows and reveal to them the path that leads to God, then Henry Adams was not a failure. He is the outstanding example in recent years of a brilliant American who has exhausted the possibilities of the various prizes for which his fellow countrymen have been striving for generations. He has taught the generations to come the worthlessness and emptiness of those prizes. He has sounded many of our current popular ideals and found them wanting. He has amply demonstrated the futility of Boston, the vulgarity of Washington, the bleakness and aridity of Puritanism, the coldness and desolation of Protestantism, the necessary limitations of democracy, the illusion of progress and the flimsiness of our scholarship.

And yet it must be confessed that Henry Adams remains a man of mystery. What that mystery is depends ultimately upon the mental and spiritual equipment of those who approach him. The conservative college graduate of bourgeois temper and outlook could never understand how Adams could trample under foot so many of our American values and ideals. The radical could never comprehend how he could be content with the dogmatic spiritual freedom and ordered artistic beauty of mediæval civilization. Revolutionary as he really was, why did he not become really red? The Catholic cannot quite see why he did not become a professing Catholic before he died. Why had he ceased to care "what new coin fate shall strike"? Why did he believe in fate at all, when he came so near to faith in God and His incarnate Son, Jesus Christ? However we take him, there remains an element of mystery—for us. For him, the mystery is solved!

SELDEN PEABODY DELANY.